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ABSTRACT

Nonschool youth groups can serve many purposes for young people, especially promoting maturity and development and helping youth to build productive lives. Simply attending youth groups may not be enough, however. Studies have often failed to show beneficial effects of youth group membership versus youth who have not been members; but the studies have not taken into account the climate of the youth groups. Effective youth groups should be vibrant--they should provide roles for youth that have power and engage in actions that really matter in their communities. A model for effective youth development practices has five critical elements: (1) philosophy (experiential learning, service, high yet realistic expectations, local connections, training, and mentoring); (2) culture (youth driven, firm but flexible, promoting communication, a safe haven for learning, working and playing hard, and affirmation and support for members; (3) power structure (autonomy-oriented adult leaders, youth as partners, partnerships with parents, and commitment to empowerment; (4) programs (valued and relevant, voluntary, high-quality, continuity and connection, linked to community, individual responsibility within group experience, opportunities to succeed, and capitalizing on the physical environment); and (5) staff (having courage and stamina, trusted and trusting, flexible, advocates for youth, knowledgeable, and committed. (20 references) (KC)

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HAVENS OF HOPE:
Vibrant Youth Groups in the Lives of Today's Young People

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All the adults make too many decisions about what we can or can't do. Adults should consult with kids before deciding rules and making decisions--especially at the county level. I feel this way about my own club, too. Adults should be in their own room sometimes. (18 year old 4-H youth)

If I wanted to recruit somebody who's older into our club, I would tell them how they get to voice their opinions in a meeting without being ridiculed or being told "that's dumb!" by other people. (16 year old 4-H youth)

The Challenge of Positive Youth Outcomes

Nonformal youth programs have been consistently challenged to demonstrate that participation in their programs makes a significant difference for the young people involved. Documenting such impacts, however, has been difficult. Often the reported advantages to participation have been more suggestive than definitive; anecdotal rather than demonstrable. The prevailing belief among those of us who work in nonformal education has been that if we could just get kids into our programs, they'd benefit and along the way develop the critical skills necessary to make the transitions to adulthood. Now we know better.

Each year, our knowledge of how youth programs impact the participants for whom they are designed continues to expand and mature. Many of us now recognize that participation alone is far from sufficient for the kinds of youth development outcomes we hope to achieve. In fact, the youth development field has been **moving from** a belief in the value of participation and **moving to** an understanding about the importance of the quality of that experience. As the two young people above made quite clear, individual groups differ substantially in how they are experienced by youth--even within the same community, within the same state, and obviously within the same national organization.

What we've had to re-learn is that not all youth groups are the same. Deja vu. But it's a message that bears remembering. In fact, a convergence of research is occurring which clearly indicates that group climate, not participation, may be the most influential factor influencing youth development outcomes. Yet, it is group climate that has received scant attention by many researchers. And a significant aspect influencing group climate is the type of adult leadership in youth groups.

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Group Climate: A Key Element

The failure to include group climate as an important variable in past research flows from the myopia of past research efforts. In the quest for quantitative purity, past research efforts have tried to conduct only random samples without looking at discriminant variables like group climate. For example, researchers would often take a random sample of participants in a youth program and compare them to a similar random sample of non-participants (Fetsch, et al., 1993; Hanna, 1988; Miller, 1991). These studies often fail to find any significant difference between participants and non-participants--despite what some young people would tell researchers in qualitative ways. Why? Because the researchers failed to account for the influence of group climate on such outcomes as self-concept, decision-making skills, concern for others, personal responsibility and peer relations, among others. Simple random sample designs wash out the differential effects of group climate. In some cases, in fact, research studies have found that participants in extra-curricular programs can actually report lower scores on variables such as self-concept and decision-making when compared to non-participants (Hanna, 1988).

As these studies have illustrated, expecting benefits from sheer participation in a nonformal youth group is not realistic. More recently, some researchers have gone one step further by trying to quantify the number of hours of participation as the determining factor. This approach also has difficulties and still falls short of getting at the real key to positive youth outcomes. Certainly, it may be easier to measure the amount of participation (number of hours of contact, numbers of weeks engaged, number of meetings attended), but we still suffer from a naive belief that all participation is the same. If we really want to understand the potential power of nonformal education, we need to look more deeply. The purpose of this article is to begin to explain the importance of group climate and what some of the new research is telling us about the critical practices for positive youth development outcomes.

More recent research (Astroth, 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; Brekke, Croymans, Mattlack, McAndrews, Morreim, Piehl, & Zurcher, 1995; Grossman, Resch, & Tierney, 1995; Leffert, Saito, Blyth, & Kroenke, 1996; McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994; Quinn, 1995) is converging around the notion that the number of hours of engagement are far less important than the quality of the environment in which youth are involved--group climate. Yet, we have not begun to incorporate this knowledge into our work and into our understand of what makes for positive youth outcomes. We've begun to recognize the importance of group climate, yet we haven't' figured out what it really consists of. We don't have a coherent model of the critical practices for positive youth development.

Despite the growing realization of the importance of group climate, some researchers continue to take the easy route of quantifying the number of hours of participation as some if this were some "protective factor" for at-risk youth. For example, the Search Institute's recent expanded list of 40 developmental assets (1996) includes the following assets:

- Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater or other arts.
- Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
- Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
- Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
- Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

The limitations of this approach become obvious almost immediately. While it would be easy to quantify whether a particular youth engaged in these activities, it misses the crux of the issue about the **quality** of the experience. We might reasonably ask what the young person is reading before declaring that merely engaging in the act of reading constitutes an asset-building activity. Doesn't the quality of the material affect the determination about the benefit of this activity?

In addition, a laundry list of hours of engagement says nothing about how a young person makes sense of the activity. What processing is done after the reading? Does the young person have the opportunity to share and reflect on what they've read with a significant, caring person? What kind of dialogue ensues where differing perceptions and impressions can be shared and explored? In other words, for the activity of reading (or any of the other asset-building activities listed by the Search Institute) to have any meaning and significance, how have we tried to use the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) to make this activity meaningful? Do we really believe that reading, say, MAD magazine and a book like The Phantom Tollbooth are comparable activities with similar effects and outcomes?

In the same way, mere numbers of hours of participation in "sports, clubs, or organizations" misses the point about the quality of that experience. For example, look back at the quotes from the two 4-H youth at the beginning of this article. One youth participated in an out-of-school program that was led by a highly authoritarian adult leader in which youth were treated as mere objects or recipients of adult dictates and the youth had little influence over program outcomes. In the other instance, the young person was involved in a club in which youth had the opportunity to explore and make decisions, where she felt treated as a partner, and the adult leaders were autonomy-oriented who respected and valued the contributions of young people. Yet both youth participated in these groups the same number of hours. Do we really believe that these are comparable experiences with similar outcomes? Could it be that there's more to asset-building than mere participation and number of hours involved?

The Search Institute's asset building is a "banking" approach to youth development--as if the number of deposits made per week makes for a sound bank account. And all the Search approach does is count desposits. Unfortunately, though, this says nothing about the viability of the bank itself. If you make lots of desposits but the institution itself is unsound, your assets may well be in jeopardy. We ought to know something about the integrity and quality of the bank itself just as we should know something about the quality of youth groups in which young people participate.

Likewise, youth development is more complex than how many hours a week are spent in some activity. The Search Institute approach appears to be premised on the "idle hands are the devil's workshop" mentality. To build assets, keeping kids busy is more important than helping them gain control over their lives. In fact, a critical look at the Search Institute's assets approach reveals that youth who have all forty assets have very little time of their own left to pursue activities of their own choosing (less than 40 hours per week by my count). Moreover, unstructured socializing with peers is deemed as inappropriate free time in the Search's asset model and is even given a negative value. Once again, it's a case of adults deciding what's best for young people and making sure they don't have much personal leisure time.

Finally, we have to admit that asset building cannot take place in the privacy of one's own room or other solitary environments. If asset building is to be real, it must occur in group interactions. So, this begs the question: what kinds of groups really build assets? In order to answer this question, we must look closely at the quality of the environment in which participation takes place.

The failure to consider group climate as a key variable in nonformal education has been a flaw of many previous research studies. As a result, we've failed to come up with much supportable evidence that young people who participate in nonformal youth programs are substantially better off than young people who don't participate at all. We've neglected to consider the overriding influence of group climate and the effect that the quality of the environment has on youth outcomes.

Rather than assume that all youth groups are created equally, why not look more closely at specific kinds of youth groups within organizations? What are the key elements of group climate? What are the distinguishing features of effective youth groups? Why are some groups, even within the same county, state or program alive and vibrant while others seems moribund and lifeless? These are the kinds of questions which guided my own research over the past two years (Astroth, 1996a; 1996b; 1996c). In the process of asking these kinds of questions, I also began to perceive a convergence in the research which suggested that effective youth development programs shared some common characteristics in several specific, but overlapping, domains. So many of these characteristics kept appearing in various research efforts that they suggested that a model of youth development practices might be useful to the field. The purpose of this article is to begin constructing the outlines and components of this

model.

Fostering Vibrancy

In trying to capture the essence of effective youth groups, I was attracted to the concept of **vibrancy** found in Mary Pipher's book, Reviving Ophelia (1994). According to Pipher, vibrancy is a characteristic of people whose psychological health is such that "they accept themselves rather than waiting for others to accept them" (p. 37). The concept of vibrancy, as I understand it, is similar in many ways to the concept of autonomy developed by Piaget and elaborated upon by Constance Kamii (1984; 1991) and other constructivists. And while "resilience" has been the latest buzzword, "vibrancy" connotes a more pro-active, initiative-taking self-directed sense of living and youth development. Vibrancy is not only a facet of individual health; it is also a feature of group health.

What does a vibrant youth group look like? Vibrant youth groups pulsate with energy, helping youth discover their personal influence over events that impact their lives. Vibrant youth groups help young people reach their potential and help them become self-directing, autonomous young adults rather than simply re-bounding from life's vagaries. Vibrant youth groups help youth thrive, not just survive. Vibrant groups are those that communicate a sense of genuineness and foster within each young person a drive toward the future. Vibrant youth groups help young people believe in themselves and nurture an inner sense of confidence and self-assuredness. These kinds of groups believe in what they do, celebrate their commitment to action and empowerment, and convey a sense of hope and courage for youth. Vibrant youth groups open doors so that youth can create positive futures for themselves. Such groups provide an equity of access (getting in the door), equity of treatment (once they're in the door) and equity of outcomes (going out the door).

Youth groups are vibrant because of a positive group climate. But saying this really doesn't help us understand the specific features of group climate. Thus, a model of vibrant youth groups would be useful. A variety of studies, including my own, have suggested an emerging model of the critical practices for positive youth outcomes.

Why do we need such a model? Having a conceptual framework of critical youth development practices which define vibrancy would be of great assistance to those working in the field who want to ensure that their efforts provide the best, research-based approach in youth development. Such a model or framework could provide common ground for youth professional across the nation by clarifying why some youth groups are more effective than others for youth outcomes. A model of critical youth development practices would also help young people themselves be better consumers of youth programs. If youth were aware of the critical practices that made for positive outcomes, they could in turn be more informed consumers of nonformal youth programs--identifying and selecting only those that met their

standards for meaningful involvement and marketable skills. A model would provide a list of critical attributes that can be investigated prior to committing to participation. A model like this would help program leaders to be more accountable to the youth they purport to serve.

Why is it so important to understand the critical practices for effective youth development outcomes? In a word--our society is changing rapidly. Youth programs are taking on more and more the **surrogate roles of parenting** that parents or extended families used to provide. While nonformal youth groups continue their more traditional roles of serving as educational, social and recreational centers for youth, increasingly they are filling a void for children formerly filled by parents or extended family. In the changing world of families, youth programs serve as supplements for incomplete or inadequate families who cannot provide for their children's needs.

Youth groups also share many similarities with family units. Youth groups are often led by adults who may exercise some level of control and exact sanctions over the behavior of members. Youth groups often have members of several age ranges and abilities, and involve youth from an extended sphere. Youth groups tend to have rituals, traditions, symbols, insignia, a culture, and a social network and support systems that are missing ingredients in some families. Not surprisingly, Heath & McLaughlin (1991) assert that successful youth organizations share many of the features "that in earlier eras characterized family life" (p. 625). In fact,

> Nonschool organizations provide multiple services that sustain them [teens] in their family roles and give them broad support for their identities as teenagers. (p. 624)

In our current society, children are seen more as objects or recipients than as resources or partners. Children cannot vote, they have few lobbyists or national organizations working on their behalf, they don't directly influence policy. Often children are the first group to be cut out of local, state and national funding proposals. Youth contributions are often discounted and devalued by many adults. In many cases, young people play no viable role in the economic vitality of their families, community or even in the organizations set up for their purported benefit. This is especially true in schools, but the scenario could be different in nonformal youth groups.

For example, in nonformal youth groups have the opportunity to exert influence over the success or failure of various parts of the program. In fact, nonformal youth programs, if led by autonomy-oriented adults, can be settings where what a 12 or 13 year old does really matters. In schools, by contrast, only a few youth can hold any positions of leadership, and most of the really important decisions are made by adults without consulting youth. This disenfranchisement is particularly true in middle schools--the same age at which youth have the highest drop out rates from organized programs and clubs.

In schools, adults feel that the consequences of failure are too great to allow youth much influence over curriculum, school activities, monetary disbursements or other management decisions. On the other hand, in nonformal youth groups, young people make these kinds of decisions nearly every time they meet. Because the impact of such decisions is not nearly so critical, youth can be more involved in the process of determining outcomes. Mistakes are viewed as opportunities to learn, not as catastrophes that must be "fixed" by adults coming to the rescue. Nonformal youth groups can teach these kinds of skills precisely because of the voluntary and marginal nature of the experience. But whether youth groups actually do this depends on the atmosphere of the individual group, not organizational policy or dogma.

In sum, community organizations are beginning to play a larger role in the lives of young people--primarily because of the kinds of changes occurring in our society. Policy makers and practitioners concerned about the future of American youth acknowledge the special and critical contribution of community organizations as resources that extend beyond family and schools. They also recognize the limitations of today's schools and families. Schools as social institutions are limited because they are built on outmoded assumptions about family and community (Matthews, 1996). "Too many families simply lack the emotional, financial, experiential or cognitive supports that a developing youngster requires" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1991, p. 624).

Programs that incorporate the critical practices for positive youth development outcomes can have long-term benefits to young people, to local communities, and to the nation as a whole. Thus, it would be well to understand what the essential, critical elements of such practices are in order to really comprehend the importance of group climate that leads to vibrancy.

This paper begins the outlines of such a model. It's my hope that this model will continue to evolve and develop, that other practitioners and scholars will refine the model and make it even more useful and explicable.

In reviewing a variety of research efforts, it appears that no single model has adequately developed a clear model for positive youth development outcomes. A few researchers have proposed elements for effective practice while others have proposed some characteristics for effective programs, but no one model puts it altogether.

A model for effective youth development practices has **five critical domains**--philosophy, culture, staff, power structure, and programs. Let me share with you what a variety of research efforts seem to be suggesting as essential elements in each domain that contribute to vibrancy.

DOMAINS OF VIBRANCY

PHILOSOPHY

A vibrant youth program is founded on and practices a set of philosophical beliefs that spring from a fundamental belief in the value of young people and their ability to be actors in building their own future rather than as pawns. Vibrant youth groups support a belief in empowerment and youth potential. Vibrant youth programs are clear about what they're doing and why they're doing it. They have a focused and articulated vision of what they are trying to accomplish in all that they do. In vibrant youth groups, the philosophical foundation grows ou' a belief in the value of young people. Vibrant youth groups exist for young people not the other way around.

Experiential learning: Youth are actively engaged in their own learning through practical, hands-on activities. Learning is real-time focused and occurs in context of what is real for youth rather than abstract or detached. Vibrant group believe in providing numerous opportunities for active participation and present real challenges for youth that can result in accomplishments valued by youth and the larger society.

Service: vibrant youth programs value and practice service to others and to the community. These kinds of groups have a belief that youth are part of the social fabric of the community and can make meaningful contributions to the improvement of the community.

High yet realistic expectations for youth: Vibrant youth groups are places where youth feel safe enough to try to exceed their own expectations and excel. Real challenges are always present where youth can succeed, often times beyond their own expectations.

Local connections: Vibrant youth groups are locally anchored but globally aware. They are part and parcel of the local community scene and are connected to the pulse of the community. They operate within and through neighborhoods, organizations, and social relationships that are part of youth's everyday experiences. At the same time, they provide ways for youth to become aware of the larger world and explore beyond the bounds of the community.

Take time for training: Effective groups recognize that process is more important than product, so the focus is on weaning rather than winning. Learning, not reaching a quick solution, is the overriding belief in these groups.

Mentoring: Vibrant youth groups match adults and older youth with other members in a one-on-one relationship. Buddy systems, big brothers or sisters, coaches--whatever the term, vibrant youth groups include a pairing strategy which creates bonds and attachments which last a long time.

CULTURE

Vibrant youth groups have a developed and express culture that is unique. The culture is often characterized by rituals, traditions, symbols or other accouterments which define who they are and how you become and stay a member. This culture often consists of the following kinds of elements:

Youth driven: the atmosphere of vibrant youth groups is sensitive to youth's needs and interests and reflects their everyday realities, values, aspirations and interests. In these groups, youth feel that they belong and have influence.

Firm yet flexible: vibrant groups are able to provide a balance between chaos and order, providing a structure that walks a fine line between being too rigid and being too loose.

Communication and listening: the culture of vibrant youth groups is one of both communicating and listening to one another. Everyone subscribes to a value that each is heard and each has a voice. Vibrant youth groups communicate that young people will be accepted for who they are and not forced into some one-dimensional organizational mold.

Safe havens for learning: vibrant groups provide young people with a haven for hope. Learning skills and experiences that will be useful in later life are central features to such groups. Often, these groups provide sanctuary from an otherwise turbulent and chaotic outside world where there appears little reason for a sense of the future.

Work hard and play hard: everyone in vibrant youth groups plays hard and works hard. Everyone excels in every aspect of the group. In vibrant groups, all youth contribute in meaningful ways according to their unique abilities.

Affirm and support one another: in vibrant youth groups, every person supports and affirms the value and worth of every other member. Youth and adults take mutual pride in the accomplishments of each individual and tend to ascribe that success to the entire group.

POWER STRUCTURE

Another important domain of group climate is the power structure or what could be called the political atmosphere or governance. Vibrant youth groups are those in which certain assumptions about governance and decision-making adhere. In such groups, there is a value placed on--

Autonomy-oriented adult leaders: the goal of vibrant youth groups is to develop moral autonomy, and vibrant youth groups involve adult leaders who believe in an autonomy-orientation rather than a control orientation. An autonomy-oriented leader provides opportunities for youth to make decisions for themselves. As a result, there are positive youth/adult relationships in such groups.

Youth as partners: youth as viewed as partners more than as resources to be exploited or as problems to be managed. Youth are genuinely involved in significant and developmentally-appropriate ways in all aspects of the group's functioning--from exploring alternative courses of action, selecting options, and implementing strategies. Even at very young ages, youth are treated as adults yet sheltered as children.

Partnerships with parents or guardians: vibrant youth groups reach out and bring in parents are valued partners in the process of youth development. While parental involvement will vary, we know from research that vibrant groups have found unique ways to involve parents in activities with their children or in the activities of other children. Parental involvement is a powerful element of truly vibrant youth groups.

Commitment to empowerment: vibrant groups recognize that their primary goal is to help youth attain self-sufficiency and autonomy. Thus, how the group is structured is defined by this goal of empowerment with youth taking leading roles in decision-making and action.

PROGRAMS

Vibrant youth groups offer a variety of programs and opportunities for involvement, but they are couched in an organizational structure founded on certain key beliefs.

Valued and relevant: there is a broad spectrum of experiences and opportunities that are tailored to the needs and interests of youth.

Voluntary: programs are shaped by youth themselves and they can choose their level of participation. No program or service is mandatory.

High quality programming: programs offered are of the highest quality and grow out of a knowledge of best practices in youth development.

Continuity and connection: the programs are linked and have a continuity with the vision and values of the organization. There is a common thread that holds the organization's programs together in a coherent and understood whole. While there is a constant variety, there is also a central core of programs that fulfill the group's value set.

Linked to community: programs are linked closely with the community and reach out to families, schools, and other community partners in providing high quality programs for their youth.

Individual responsibility/Group experience: vibrant youth groups provide the necessary individual attention within the context of a group experience. Groups are kept small in order to provide for individual contributions and actions within a group context .

Opportunities to Succeed: vibrant groups provide youth with numerous opportunities to succeed so that they are motivated to try increasingly more difficult challenges. Youth feel that the group is a safe place to try and excel.

Capitalize on the physical environment for learning: vibrant groups make the most of their physical environment and use it to enhance learning.

STAFF

A critical component of group climate is the staff (volunteer, paid, full-time, part-time, adult or youth) working with young people and who support the philosophy, programs, culture and goverance structure of vibrant youth groups. Vibrant youth groups require a unique kind of person who staffs such groups.

Courage and stamina: Staff have the courage to work in all kinds of situations because they care about young people and have a "stick-to-it-ness" that means they are survivors, not quitters. Staff working with youth know that they have made a commitment for the long-haul and that this is not just another 8-to-5 job.

Trusted and trusting: vibrant groups have staff who are trusted by youth and in turn trust youth as well. This is part of the supportive atmosphere that exists in vibrant youth groups. Trust relations are built over time and arise from the other components of vibrant youth groups. Staff in vibrant youth groups have learned how to develop trusting relationships with others.

Flexible: staff of vibrant organizations know how to be flexible and "go with the flow." Staff know how to deal with the unexpected and roll with the punches without going ballistic about changes and challenges.

Advocates for youth: staff members of vibrant organizations are advocates for youth, helping give voice to youth concerns and issues in the larger community, making sure that youth are at the table when youth issues are discussed. They have the skills necessary to empower young people to be involved in decision-making. Such staff help youth become partners in the community rather than objects, recipients or problems to be dealt with.

Knowledgeable: staff members are grounded in youth development principles such as attention to developmental differences of young people, respect, and valuing youth for who they are. Effective staff understand the key principles of youth development and practice these in their work. Finally, staff of vibrant youth groups have at least one area of expertise--something they care passionately about and are willing to share with young people.

Committed for the long haul: the best staff are those who are committed to youth for the long haul. Youth--especially troubled youth--have experienced too much change in their relationships with adults and need to know that organizational staff are there for an extended period of time.

This model is far from complete. It needs more refinement and testing. But it demonstrates that group climate is made up of some broad domains that are critical to positive youth development outcomes. Contrary to the prevailing popular approaches today, it clearly illustrates that participation alone in nonformal programs does not ensure that youth will necessarily benefit. The quality and character of adult leadership, for example, is central to the kind of climate that exists for youth. While young people can certainly impact climate to a very great extent, experience shows that adults can effectively block or facilitate overall group climate. Adults who can increase their autonomy-oriented behaviors and decrease their control-oriented behaviors can measurably affect young people's experiences in youth groups.

In return, youth who participate in vibrant groups develop stronger life skills, are more satisfied with the group experience, participate in more activities, and feel a greater sense of ownership for the group (Astroth, 1996a). As Alfie Kohn (1994) observed, youth "acquire a sense of significance from doing significant things, from being active participants in their own education" (p. 282). To Kohn's statement we can now add that youth also need environments in which they share power with adults. All youth organizations would benefit from understanding that participation alone is not an antidote for our social problems, but that the kinds of program we offer must be built on the principles of vibrancy and the practices of democracy. As Kamii has poignantly observed (1991, p. 398):

> We cannot expect children to accept ready-made values and truths all the way through school, and then suddenly make choices in adulthood. Likewise, we cannot expect them to be manipulated with reward and punishment in school, and to have the courage of a Martin Luther King in adulthood.

But it's not just in schools that this needs to occur. In fact, it's probably even more critical for this to happen *outside of schools*. Since youth spend more time out of school than they do in school, the importance of nonformal youth organizations cannot be understated. But participation alone is not enough--young people must be involved in organizations with the kind of group climate that will lead to positive youth development outcomes.

At the heart of all this emerges a consistent message. Adults need to connect with youth. There are approximately 50+ million elementary and secondary school students in our country and about 200 million adults. If just one adult would connect with each of these young people, it would substantially change the future of this generation. And just imagine what would happen if ***all*** adults could connect with today's youth, could become their advocates and work with them as assets rather than as objects.

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